7: Nicholson U-5 (no date) 1934 FF52 Nupe FF52 Bida

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[Title page]

Nigeria: Pottery. **Nicholson.**

Bida (Nupe) Pottery. *By W. E. Nicholson.*

These notes refer to one only of the groups of potters in Bida, Niger Province, and the actual workers observed belong to Augi's house in the Quarter of Natsu.

I. *Workers.*—All the operators are women. The family came originally from Sokoto, but the mother of the present potters is said to have learnt the trade from a Yoruba woman, *i.e.*, the technique may be Yoruba or Nupe in origin. All are Mohammedans, so that the survival of tabus, etc., in the craft is not to be expected, and no trace of them was found.

Two varieties of article are made:—

(i) Small water jug, chiefly used for ablutionary purposes, called in Nupe *Masuge* (equivalent to the Hausa *Buta* or *Shantali*—Man, 1929, 34).

(ii) A larger water-container called in Nupe *Dukā-nyetā* (equivalent to the Hausa *Pukunya*—Man 1931, 186).

The following notes refer to the former only of these.

II. *Preparation of the Clay.*—Suitable clay is found in the swamps of the Gbako river at Badeggi, about 10 miles east of Bida. Itinerant vendors from this village bring it round for sale, and it costs about 10d. per cwt. During part of the rainy season floods prevent its collection. The clay is pounded to powder in a wooden mortar identical with that used in the preparation of food. It is levigated—

(i) Usually by the addition of powdered potsherds: this powder is sifted before being added to the clay, through a sieve made of slivers of bamboo.

(ii) Sometimes native bricks of sun-dried mud are burnt and powdered and used instead of potsherds.

After the addition of the levigating material the clay is wetted until it attains the right consistency.

III. *Building of the Pot.*—(*a*) Old cloths are spread on the ground and the operator places in front of herself a flat sand-stone slab about 1 inch thick; it is said that these stones are purchased from the Bead-makers and that they come from further south in Horin country; they are 'natural,' *i.e.*, pieces of stratified rock which splits into suitable thicknesses; the slab is well dusted with powdered potsherds to prevent sticking. A ball of clay (*a* (i)) is placed on the slab, manipulated into a 'pancake' (*a* (ii)) and beaten out thin with a stone hand-beater; any

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303 suitable piece of the local sandstone or ironstone which may be found is used as beater without artificial shaping.

(*b*) when the pancake becomes sufficiently thin it is placed on the bottom of a small inverted pot and beaten again with the hand-beater to make it slightly convex.

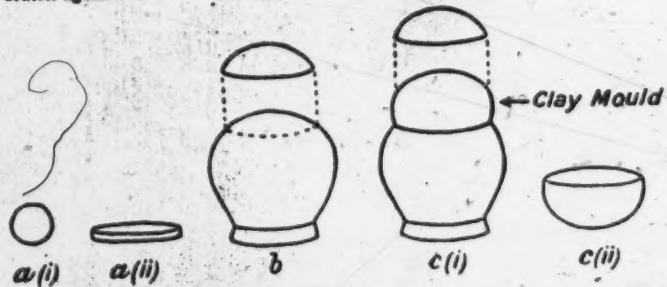

FIG. 1. STAGES A–C IN THE BUILDING OF THE POT.

(*c*) A clay mould is then placed upon the inverted pot and the clay beaten over this until it is shaped like an inverted bowl (*c* (i)).

It is then removed, turned over and put on one side to dry (*c* (ii)), and is eventually used as one half of the finished article.

(*d*) Processes (*a*), (*b*) and (*c*) are repeated and a second bowl identical in size with the first is made to form the second half. When both halves have been allowed to harden a little, one is inverted and superimposed on the other so that the edges coincide. The operator cements the two halves together by smearing clay round the line of junction so that a hollow ball, like a flattened sphere, is produced without any orifice.

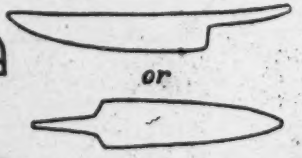

FIG. 2.

(*e*) A small hole, 2 inches in diameter, is cut in the centre of the top with an iron knife.

(*f*) To put the mouth on the pot, the operator takes a thin roll of clay and fits it to the edge of the hole by manipulation with the right hand while the pot is rotated by the left. The lip is shaped between the thumb and finger of the right hand and polished with a wetted rag.

(*g*) A thin roll of clay is then kneaded on to the pot to form a shoulder and the polishing with the wet rag continued.

(*h*) One or two handles are now attached; the operator takes a roll of clay of suitable length, attaches it first to the body of the pot, gives it an outward curve and attaches the other end to the mouth.

FIG. 3. STAGES *d*–*h* IN THE BUILDING OF THE POT.

(*j*) The exterior of the pot is polished by rubbing with a smooth, water-worn pebble (? of quartzite) and a piece of wetted rag.

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(*k*) Various decorations—all incised or stamped—are added :—

(i) By rocking and advancing a mussel shell held in the right hand, a 'compressed' chevron effect is produced (Fig. 4). The shell is 'rocked' on its rounded edge, and moved simultaneously in a direction at right angles to the plane of that edge.

(ii) A wide chevron is incised with the edge or point of a cowry shell (Fig. 5).

(iii) The sharp end of a (? snail) shell, the shape of a whelk shell, is used as a die to imprint a series of small holes or circles.

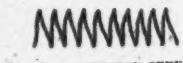

Fig. 4. COMPRESSED CHEVRON.

Fig. 5. WIDE CHEVRON.

(*l*) The pot is left to dry for 2 nights and 1 day (in the sun) and is then ready for firing. No wash is used before firing.

IV. *Firing of the Pot.*—A small circular kiln of mud is used, about 3 feet high, without a roof. There is an aperture at the bottom on one side for the insertion of fuel. On the inside of the kiln, above the top of the aperture, three or four protuberances are made in the mud wall, jutting out into the interior of the kiln. These act as brackets upon which a large crock rests.

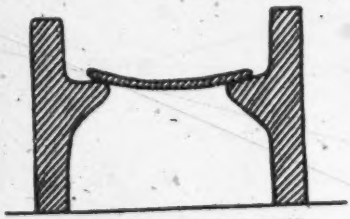

Fig. 6. CROSS SECTION OF THE KILN.

On the top of this crock the pots are piled and covered over with more crocks. A very small wood fire is lighted underneath. When the pots become black with smoke more wood is added, and the fire is allowed to burn fiercely for about an hour.

V. *Colouring of the Pot.*—

(i) Red.—If the pot is to be red it is now finished.

(ii) Brown.—In some cases a brown wash (I think of reddish earth) is used.

(iii) Black.—Some pots are blackened by the following process. Bark of the shea-nut tree is placed in a bowl of hot water, and then brought to the boil; pods of the locust-bean are added. In this decoction the pots are dipped while still hot from the firing; they are allowed to cool, placed in the ashes of the fire, and re-dipped when hot; the process is repeated about three times and the pot becomes finally almost coal-black.

The price of the finished product is about ½d. each. There are a few variations in style :—(i) Square shape instead of round. (ii) Number of handles varies. (iii) Larger sizes are made.

W. E. NICHOLSON.